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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of the Teachers' Activity Centers (TACs) in Malaysia. The TACs evolved from Local Resource Centers and District Resource Centers of the 1970s and 1980s. The 350 TACs in the country were initially supplied with basic tools for the production of teaching-learning resources. With administrative reorganization, the provision of a building to 200 TACs, the appointment of a full-time coordinator, and the provision of an annual budget, the role of the TACs has expanded to collaboratively meeting the challenges faced by teachers at the local level. The activities of the TACs include training and education, dissemination of information to teachers and administrators, production services, advisory services and technological leadership, all of which collectively contribute to the improvement of teaching-learning in the classroom. Among the challenges being faced are encouraging the use of the centers and improving their effectiveness. Future development of the centers is likely to focus on management, human resource development, physical facilities, and optimizing their utilization. (ND)

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THE TEACHERS' ACTIVITY CENTERS OF MALAYSIA

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Abstract

THE TEACHERS' ACTIVITY CENTERS OF MALAYSIA

Malaysia is an small country in South-East Asia which has made great progress since independence as a result of the implementation of various policies and programs. This paper describes the development of one such program towards the attainment of educational excellence and national development, the Teachers' Activity Centers (TACs).

Based on an analysis of official reports of the Ministry of Education, State Education Departments, selected TACs and observations at four centers, the history, development, roles, present activities, challenges and future developments of the TACs are reported.

The TACs evolved from Local Resource Centers and District Resource Centers of the 1970s and 80s. The 350 TACs in the country were initially supplied with basic tools for the production of teaching-learning resources. With administrative reorganization, the provision of a building to 200 TACs, the appointment of a full-time coordinator and the provision of an annual budget, the role of the TACs has expanded to collaboratively meeting the challenges faced by teachers at the local level. The activities of TACs include training and education, dissemination of information to teachers and administrators, production services, advisory services and technological leadership, all of which collectively contribute to the improvement of teaching-learning in the classroom. Among the challenges being faced are encouraging the use of the centers and improving their effectiveness. Future developments of the centers are likely to focus on management, human resource development, physical facilities and optimizing the utilization.

THE TEACHERS' ACTIVITY CENTERS OF MALAYSIA

Introduction

Malaysia is an independent nation, made up of thirteen states and one federal territory. The country is divided into two regions, Peninsular Malaysia extending southwards from Thailand, and East Malaysia on the island of Borneo. With an area of approximately 330,000 sq. km. (approx. 128,000 sq. miles), a multi-racial and multi-religious population of approximately 20 million inhabitants living in harmony, warm weather (80-95°F) and abundant sunshine throughout the year, being free from natural disasters, and a stable government, the country has made great progress since independence in 1957.

Malaysia has enjoyed a particularly strong economy for the past 10 years, with an average growth rate of 8%. From an economy based on the production of rubber, tin, palm oil and timber in the 1960s, it has moved to manufacturing and service based economies.

With the momentum gained over the years, Malaysia has set itself a target of becoming a fully developed nation by the year 2020. This goal, commonly referred to as *Vision 2020*, is essentially a long-term vision of broad policy directions towards becoming a progressive, prosperous and united nation.

Malaysia subscribes to the use of five-year development plans to achieve its goals. The 7th Malaysia Plan, launched in May 1996, seeks to take the country into a even higher plane of growth with special emphasis on productivity and quality driven strategies, and accelerating human resource development through increasing investments in education, training and the use of information technology.

The focus of education under the 7th Malaysia Plan is on improving quality and increasing the quantity of output to produce citizens who are knowledgeable, disciplined and

have high moral values and good work ethics. This is in line with the National Education Philosophy which states:

"Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of society and the nation at large."

Many programs have been initiated and continue to be introduced in line with the National Education Philosophy. One such program towards achieving educational excellence, and in particular towards improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, has been the establishment of the Teachers Activity Centers (TACs), or the *Pusat Kegiatan Guru* (PKG) in the Malaysian Language. The TACs were conceived and developed in response to the need for teachers to face the challenges and demands of the profession. The TACs provide continuing education and training, facilities for the production of teaching-learning materials, and other professional development activities. The TACs represent an important step in the development of the infrastructure towards attaining excellence in education.

This paper describes the development, role and activities of the Teachers' Activity Centers of Malaysia in promoting quality education and in meeting the information needs of teachers and educators of the country.

History of the Teachers' Activity Centers

The Teachers' Activity Centers started on a very modest scale with the establishment of 302 Local Resource Centers (LRC) in 1978 throughout the country to encourage the use of audio-visual resources in the teaching-learning process. The LRCs were renamed District Media Centers (DMC) in 1981 to reflect the district-wide services. With the establishment of State Education Resource Centers (SERC) in four of the 14 states in the country in 1982 and the establishment of School Resource Centers (SRC) in all schools in 1983, the term District Media Center was changed to District Education Resource Centers (DERC) in 1986.

The DERCs were designed to provide services to 15 - 20 schools in the vicinity of the center. The primary services in the initial stages were the loan of teaching materials and equipment to teachers, and the provision of basic equipment and facilities for teachers to produce their own low-cost teaching-learning materials. Through the DERCs, the Ministry of Education hoped to expand the use of educational technology in the teaching-learning process and contribute to the quality of education in the country, particularly in the rural schools. This was a step towards addressing the imbalance between urban and rural schools.

In 1990, the name of the DERCs was changed to Teachers' Activity Centers (TAC) to reflect the wider range of activities carried out. This was a result of the expanding role of the DERCs in the professional development of teachers as well as to avoid confusion with the administrative districts, as there was often more than one DERC in an administrative district. The TACs were intended to be logistic centers for teaching and learning activities, as well as centers for the discussions and deliberations on professional matters amongst teachers. This role has evolved over the years into one of providing a variety of services to teachers and educational administrators on professional matters relating to curriculum development, implementation and evaluation, in line with the National Education Philosophy.

The Present Functions and Roles of the TACs

In the six years since their formal establishment, the TACs have assumed a number of functions. These functions may be broadly categorized as:

- a. *Educational institutions*, which meet the continuing education needs of teachers, administrators, and the information needs of parents and the community at large. These needs, whether identified by administrators at higher levels or by the teachers themselves, are addressed through various activities designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom and their management skills.
- b. *Institutions of collaborative efforts*, where teachers and administrators can meet and share knowledge, ideas, skills, expertise or equipment for the betterment of education at the local level, and as well as discuss and resolve local problems. This sharing also leads to a team spirit and a sense of unity, which in turn can lead of a more caring society.
- c. *Institutions for the democratization of education*, where schools can obtain and utilize resources through the TACs, many of which would not normally be available to rural and needy schools. At the TACs, teachers can also exchange ideas, materials, and obtain encouragement from those who have more experience.
- d. *Resource centers* within an educational network, where the TACs constantly acquire, produce, store, and provide access to a variety of resources. TACs also receive and contribute to resource centers at the national, state and school levels, in particular the SERCs and the SRCs. The SERCs provide guidance, administrative support and facilities for the production of more sophisticated materials for the TACs, which are then made available to the SRCs in the member schools.

To realize these functions, the TACs play a number of roles which may be categorized as:

- a. *Centers for curriculum development*, where each TAC carries out professional development activities based on the local needs of teachers. Teachers are able to discuss and seek advice on teaching methods and courses, develop teaching-learning materials, and participate in other activities.
- b. *Change agents*, where TACs act to modernize teaching-learning methods using currently available technology in an integrated manner across the curriculum. The TACs also act as banks of innovative and creative ideas in teaching and learning.
- c. *Problem solvers*, where TACs attempt to address human, physical and competency problems. Through close interaction, the sharing of ideas and resources, and planned activities, the TACs are able to address many of the problems faced.
- d. *Components of a resource center network*, which provide access to a variety of materials for reference and loan. The main clients of the TACs are teachers in a particular area, and they are provided with access to print and non-print materials, both local and distant, for their professional development. This is of immense value to isolated schools with poor communication links.
- e. *Agents of social and community activities*, where teachers can meet under informal conditions to participate in social, recreational, sporting, cultural and welfare activities. These activities help to develop a team spirit, mutual understanding and unity among the teachers within an area. These activities may also involve non-educational community associations, government agencies and commercial organizations.

Goals and Objectives of the TACs

The goal of the TACs is to improve the quality of education through the improvement of the teaching-learning process. This is to be achieved by raising the professionalism of teachers, based on the application of the National Education Philosophy. The TACs aim to make use of the potential and individuality of each teacher to help them carry out their duties and responsibilities at every level.

This goal is translated into a number of objectives at the federal, state and district levels. Each TAC is also free to set its own objectives and priorities to attain the goal. The objectives of individual TACs generally tend to deal with:

- a. the improvement of the quality of education, especially in rural schools,
- b. the advancement of professionalism among teachers,
- c. the production of teaching-learning materials,
- d. the development of the TAC resource center,
- e. the development of school resource centers,
- f. the provision of a meeting place for teacher-initiated activities,
- g. the provision of technical advice on the use of educational media,
- h. the fostering of a closer relationship among the schools and with the community,
- i. the attracting of teachers towards using the TAC fully,
- j. the identification and resolution of teachers problems,
- k. the conduct of research,
- l. the cultivation of a community spirit among the teachers,
- m. the development of a closer relationship with the commercial and industrial sectors.

Administration of the TACs

The TACs are administered by the Educational Technology Division of the Ministry of Education, assisted by the State Education Resource Centers. Each TAC has between 10 and 30 schools under it. Each center has a full-time Coordinator, who is a trained and experienced teacher and has attended in-service courses on education technology, management and librarianship ranging from a few weeks to a full certificate or diploma at a college or university. The coordinator is assisted by a committee of principals and teachers from the member schools in the administration of the center. This committee plans and implements a wide range of activities to meet its goals and objectives.

There are presently 350 TACs in the country. Of the 350, 200 have a building of their own with basic furnishing and equipment, whereas the other 150 operate from centrally located schools with the basic equipment.

All TACs were supplied with basic audio-visual and production equipment over the period 1988-1990. These items included radio-cassettes recorders, television receivers, video cassette recorders, portable generators (for schools without electricity), cameras and associated photographic equipment, basic woodworking equipment, basic electronic equipment, and a personal computer.

Beginning in 1992, each TAC has also been provided with an annual grant for operating purposes. The present grant amounts to RM 20,000 (approx. US \$ 8,000) per year for each TAC. The salaries of the coordinators are paid through federal funds.

The TACs carry out a variety of activities to accomplish their goals. Teachers and educational administrators have come to regard the TAC as a special place where workshops, courses, seminars and other activities of common interest and for the common good are held. A sample of the activities is described in the following section.

Activities of the TACs

An analysis of selected reports from the Educational Technology Division, Ministry of Education, three State Education Departments and six TACs shows that the centers carry out a variety of activities, which may be broadly categorized as follows:

- a. *Training and Education:* This is by far the most prevalent activity. Various courses, seminars and workshops are held for new as well as experienced teachers, senior assistants, principals, district administrators and even parents. These cover a range of topics, e.g. orientation for new teachers, courses on drama in language teaching, test preparation, production of educational newsletters, athletic coaching, motivational and time-management talks for teachers, etc.
- b. *Dissemination of Information:* Meetings and briefings are held to convey and exchange information. These assemblies deal with various matters, e.g. subject-panel meetings, management issues, exploring means of improving the academic performance, textbook distribution, organization of reading camps, etc. Teachers are also free to use the TACs for meetings at their own initiative.
- c. *Production Services:* Teachers also use the TAC to plan and produce simple books, transparencies, graphic materials, simple audio recordings, as well as the duplication of federally produced educational radio and TV programs. All TACs are provided with duplicating machines, transparency makers, plastic sealers, polystyrene cutters and other simple production equipment, as well as computers for producing simple teaching-learning materials. Many TACs also produce their own monthly or quarterly bulletin.

- d. *Lending Services:* The TACs loan out books, audio-visual materials and equipment such as slide projectors, public address systems, cameras and simple production equipment for use by teachers in their schools. This is of great benefit to small and isolated schools.
- e. *Technical Advisory and Assistance Services:* TAC coordinators are often called upon to provide advice and help in the setting up and operation of school resource centers and associated equipment.
- f. *Reference Services:* Each TAC has a basic collection of books, magazines, journals, audio recordings, video recordings, charts, transparencies, and other teaching-learning materials. These are available for reference by teachers of member schools.
- g. *Computer-Related Services:* All TACs were originally supplied with a personal computer and printer in 1990. Many TACs have increased the numbers and the capacity of the computers. These computers are heavily made use of by teachers. Many of the TACs are currently contemplating being linked to Internet services.
- h. *Community Services:* TACs also organize and carry out community related services. Meetings are frequently held with community leaders, parents and other members of the community. Activities carried out include drawing up strategies for the improvement of the children's education, producing guidelines for parents on the effective use of leisure time by their children, and contributing in cash and kind to the betterment of the surroundings.
- i. *Other activities,* which include competitions, exhibitions, celebrations of cultural festivals, hosting of visitors, exchange visits by coordinators, etc.

The activities of the TACs attract many teachers and administrators. Based on the statistics in the annual reports, there are between 1 to 4 visits per teacher per year on the average. For example, in the state of Pahang, there were 1,047 activities carried out by the 30 TACs in 1994, and the total attendance at these activities was 22,760 persons. Taking individual centers, the Sungai Lembing TAC in Pahang had 576 teachers in its 21 member schools in 1994, and a total of 566 visits were recorded for its 36 activities in the year. The Alor Jangus TAC in Perak had 398 teachers among its 22 member schools in 1992, and recorded 1634 visits for the year.

The Information Dissemination Role of the TACs

The TACs have played a role in the dissemination of information. The principal activities that center around training and education, meetings, briefings, advisory services and reference services, all contribute to the dissemination of information.

The centers have become a place for most educational meetings and briefings in the locality, partly because of the available facilities and organizational skills of the coordinators. In some TACs, the use of the center as a meeting place has become so great to the extent that other activities have had to take a lower priority.

The centers also maintain a close liaison with federal, state, special and public libraries, which allow them to disseminate information from other sources to the teachers.

Many of the centers also publish their own newsletters, which again assists in the dissemination of information.

In a society where the oral form of communication was predominant until recently, and the printed and electronic forms are only now becoming the principal means of communication, the TACs have contributed to the dissemination of information.

Challenges Faced by TACs

While the TACs have achieved considerable success, there are still problems and challenges being faced.

The main challenge has been to interest the teachers into using the TACs. As with any innovation, teachers took some time to become aware of the potential and benefits of the TACs. However, as a result of talks, newsletters, exposure courses, and other publicity activities, almost all teachers are now aware of the TACs and this not a serious problem.

A more current challenge is get teachers to use the TACs effectively, given the time constraints of teachers. Teachers are constantly kept occupied with their teaching and administrative duties in their schools, and as such many cannot find time to use the TACs.

An even greater challenge is to ascertain the effectiveness of the TACs by examining to what extent teachers use the TACs to improve the quality of teaching-learning in the classroom, and the quality of education. Many teachers attend the programs at the TACs every year, but the effect of the activities on the teaching-learning has yet to be evaluated. Some small research studies have been done, but these need to be improved upon.

Future Developments

Based on observations of current trends, the future developments of the TACs are likely to concentrate on management, human resource development, physical development, technological development and optimization of utilization.

The management of the TACs has been the focus of two national seminar organized by the Educational Technology Division in 1992 and 1995 for the TAC Coordinators. Various proposals have been put forward, and the use of strategic management, with mission statements, goals, objectives and client charters appears to be gaining prominence.

Administratively, some of the TACs are beginning to develop branches or sub-TACs especially in the larger states such as Sabah.

Human resource development is another area of concern. The education and training of the TAC coordinators and the members of the management committee will help produce better managed TACs. As experienced TAC coordinators leave due to promotions, retirements, etc., new coordinators will also have to be trained in a systematic manner. The quality and professionalism of the coordinators will also be given attention.

Physical development is also expected to take place with the provision of buildings for remaining 150 TACs. The current buildings also need to be renovated to suit their present functions, which in some cases are different from those originally envisaged.

The newer communication and information technologies are also slowly being incorporated into the TACs, and will be given more attention in the years to come.

Another area of future development is to optimize the utilization of the TACs. Given the single coordinator without any support staff and only volunteer assistants, the range of activities that can be carried out are limited. It is therefore necessary that needs assessment be carried out so as to provide services which effectively meet the real needs of the teachers.

Further Information

Further information on the Teachers Activity Centers in Malaysia may be obtained from:

Director,
Educational Technology Division,
Ministry of Education,
Bukit Kiara,
50604 Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

or through the author of this paper

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